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SOME SOURCES OF COMIC EFFECT IN PETRONIUS

BY KEITH PRESTON

The relation of Petronius to comedy is a subject which has already engaged the attention of scholars. In his very valuable studies on the literary sources of Petronius, Collignon¹ devotes considerable space to this topic. Starting with a collection of all explicit references to drama, in the *Satiricon*, the more significant of which have to do with the mime, he proceeds to examine the literary material of his author for points of resemblance to the mime and the new comedy. His comparison shows, quite conclusively, that Petronius was very greatly influenced by the former; as for the new comedy, at least in so far as it is represented by Plautus and Terence, Collignon finds but few parallels.

The influence of the mime on Petronius can, in truth, hardly be exaggerated. Reich,² in his somewhat sweeping manner, asserts the intimate connection between mime and the *Satyricon*. Thomas³ has some excellent remarks on the same subject, and Rosenblüth in his work on the sources of Petronius⁴ rehearses and considerably augments the material collected by Collignon. As regards such matters as explicit reference to mime and comedy, resemblances in language and style to such fragments as we have of mime, typical characters, and episodes, and the element of parody which is common to Petronius and the mime, the studies referred to above, particularly those of Collignon and Rosenblüth, are fairly complete. I wish, then, in the present paper, to accept their conclusions in regard to mime and Petronius, and discuss mainly some matters of technique in the handling of comic episodes which will bear further emphasis.

There is apparent, at the outset, a certain regularity about Petronius' treatment of comic episodes, and a repetition of several

¹ A. Collignon, *Étude sur Pétrone*, Paris, 1892.

² H. Reich, *Der Mimus*, Berlin, 1903, p. 35.

³ Emile Thomas, *Pétrone*, Paris, 1902, p. 172.

⁴ M. Rosenblüth, *Beiträge zur Quellenkunde von Petrons Satiren*, Berlin, 1909, pp. 36-55.

recognized devices for farcical effect. The thesis that Petronius was writing mainly for comic effect needs no defense; in fact, through one of his characters, he voices the feeling that tragic episodes, except for purposes of parody, are quite against the proprieties in this comedy of low life. Cf. Petr. 80. 3 where Giton, interposing himself as peacemaker between his jealous admirers, who are on the point of engaging in a sword fight, "petebatque suppliciter ne Thebanum par humilis taberna spectaret."¹ It is not detracting from Petronius, who has shown his powers of restrained and subtle humor in many places, to say that he conceived of himself primarily as a γελωτοποιός, and that there is a decided element of the theatrical in his constant insistence upon laughter and applause. The humor of an incident is not left to make its own appeal to the reader; we are told that it provoked "gales of laughter," or "bursts" of applause. Thus *risus* and *plausus* are combined: 11. 2, risu plausuque; 18. 7, complosis manibus in tantum repente risum effusa; 20. 6, ancilla risu meo prodita comploso manus; 36. 4, damus plausum . . . et res . . . ridentes aggredimur; cf. for plausus only, 50. 1, 68. 6. As for *risus*, we find such strong expressions as: 24. 5, Giton et risu dissolvebat ilia sua; 57. 1, usque ad lacrimas rideret; 20. 7, non indecenti risu latera commovit; 58. 1, risum iam diu compressum etiam indecenter effudit; 140. 10, ingenti risu; 10. 3, diffusi in risum. The number of times which *risus*, *rideo*, etc., recur in Petronius is striking; cf. Segebadé and Lommatszsch, *Lexicon Petronianum*, s.v. Nowhere else in Latin literature is such a premium put upon laughter; indeed, the conventional Roman attitude with reference to hearty laughter as related to *gravitas* may be seen from Quint. vi. 3. 8: risus res levis et quae ab scurris et mimis moveatur. I believe that Thomas² makes a very acute observation when he says that the keynote of the *Satiricon* is struck in Petronius 19. 1: omnia mimico risu exsonuerant.

¹ One is tempted, though this is, perhaps, over-subtle, to see, in these words, a direct contrast between classic tragedy and comedy, as specialized in the tabernariae. The reference to tragedy is clear, for in Thebanum par we have an obvious allusion to the tragic case of Eteocles and Polinices; cf. also the high-flown language that follows "neve sanguine mutuo pollueremus familiaritatis clarissimae sacra." In view of this it may be significant that Giton here refers to the lodging, elsewhere called cella, deversorium, in the words humilis taberna.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 213.

More significant still, for comparison with farce, is the manner in which the author accelerates action toward the close of an episode, if several characters are on the scene, engaging everyone in a free-for-all, or ending the incident abruptly by the rapid exit of one of the principals, accompanied often by a slamming of doors. These swift disappearances are particularly characteristic; in fact, *Encolpius* and his associates seem always to be leaving the stage on the dead run; cf. 6. 2: *subduxi me et cursim Ascyllon persequi coepi*; 15.8: *praecipites abimus praeclusisque foribus ridere . . . coepimus*; 90. 1: *et ille . . . operuit caput extraque templum profugit*; 91. 3: *extraho Gitona raptimque in hospitium meum pervolo. Praeclusis deinde foribus*; 94. 7; *continuo limen egressus adduxit repente ostium cellae et ad Gitona investigandum cucurrit*; 138. 3: *aniculae . . . per aliquot vices secutae fugientem "prende furem" clamant, evasi tamen omnibus digitis inter praecipitem decursam cruentatis*. That type of farcical climax in which every character is engaged in frenzied activity is seen to great advantage in the mimic marriage, Petr. 26, in itself a theme that had probably been treated on the stage.¹ It is hardly possible to dwell on the details of this picture, but the desired effects are skilfully produced. The same may be said of the even more objectionable passage, Petr. 140 f. To make possible description of events in progress on either side of a closed door, Petronius has them watched through a keyhole or chink; cf. 26. 4, 96.1, 140. 11. This was a favorite stage device.²

Out-and-out buffoonery of a mild and a more drastic order is, of course, inseparable from this sort of farce. Blows (*verbera*) are not uncommon; cf. 11. 4: *lorum de pera solvit et me coepit non perfunctorie verberare*; 79. 11: *verberibus excitavi*; cf. also 15. 1: *misit in faciem Ascylli tunicam*; 95. 5: *urceolum fictilem in Eumolpi caput iaculatus est, solvitque clamantis frontem et de cella se prori-puit*. The grand *mêlée* or fracas in which everybody engages is another example of the kind of climax noted above; cf. Eumolpus' encounter with the *insularii*, Petr. 95. 7-9, and the combat on shipboard, 108. 7-13. The breaking of dishes is more than once employed for comic effect; cf. 22. 3, 64. 10, 70. 5. At 53. 11 of the

¹ Cf. Rosenblüth, *op. cit.*, p. 53, referring to the *Nuptiae* of Laberius.

² Rosenblüth, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

Cena the fall of a mountebank from his ladder is disastrous to Trimalchio, and in 136. 1-3, Oenothra's tumble from a rickety stool is described with an evident straining after comic effect: *fracta est putris sella, quae staturae altitudinem adiecerat, anumque pondere suo deiectum super foculum mittit. frangitur ergo cervix cucumelae ignemque modo convalescentem restinguit. vexat cubitum ipsa stipiti ardenti faciemque totam excitato cinere perfundit. consurrexi equidem turbatus anumque non sine risu erexi.* For similar mischances cf. the enforced bath of Ascyltos and Encolpius, 72. 7-8, and the humiliation of Fortunata, 67. 12.

In the series of detached and more or less independent episodes that make up what remains to us of the *Satiricon*, the most extended, the most interesting, and the most complete in itself is the *Cena Trimalchionis*. The *Cena* is, to all intents and purposes, a literary mime, yet it preserves the same dramatic qualities that we have noted in other parts of the *Satiricon*. As a literary mime, it may be compared with Theocritus 15, where we have, as in the *Cena*, a change of scene within the mime, and, to a less degree than in Petronius, the introduction of new characters. The *Cena* compares also with Herondas and Theocritus, and other authors of the literary mime, in many points of language and style which have been adequately discussed elsewhere.¹ For present purposes, the thing to be observed is the way in which Petronius gives life, movement, and a dramatic climax to what might naturally have been a more or less stationary picture.

The element of surprise is of course important, and, in this connection, the culinary conceits of Trimalchio and his cooks have a special value. We are not to suppose that banquets, even parvenu banquets, were featured by such extravagances, nor can we assume that these bizarre devices are lugged in by Petronius merely for satirical effect. The attitude of the reader must be that of Encolpius, exasperated appreciation; these things are cheaply sensational, it is true, but they are successful sensations, and the animated menu is not the least feature in the interest of the *Cena*. Quite in line with such devices is the continual introduction of new entertainers, new slaves, new guests (Habinnas and Scintilla), and new demonstrations

¹ Rosenblüth, *op. cit.*, pp. 37 f.

from the musical familia of Trimalchio, which Encolpius compares to the chorus of a pantomime: Petr. 31. 7: pantomimi chorum, non patris familiae triclinium crederes. One of the stock subjects of imitation in mime was intoxication,¹ a source of humor which was not neglected also in the new comedy, as in Plaut. *Most.* 315ff.; *Pseud.* 1285 ff.; and elsewhere. This kind of comic effect is handled with particular skill in the *Cena*; the vinous exaltation of Trimalchio and his guests, increasing by slow but clearly indicated stages, gradually speeds up the action of the piece and culminates in the turbulent finale, where Trimalchio invites the celebration of his own funeral—"consonuere cornicines funebri strepitu—unus praecipue servus libitinarii illius qui inter hos honestissimus erat tam valde intonuit ut totam concitaret viciniam. itaque vigiles qui custodiebant vicinam regionem, rati ardere Trimalchionis domum, effregerunt ianuam subito et cum aqua securibusque tumultuari suo iure coeperunt. nos occasionem opportunissimam nacti Agamemnoni verba dedimus raptimque tam plane quam ex incendio fugimus." Cf. Cicero *Pro Caelio* 65: mimi ergo est exitus, non fabulae, in quo cum clausula non invenitur, fugit aliquis e manibus, deinde scabillae concrepant, aulaeum tollitur.

A more drastic form of buffoonery is that phallic element, which is so pronounced in the *Satiricon* (cf. particularly 129. 1, 92. 9–11, 108. 10, 132, 140), and which seems almost certainly traceable, in part at least, to the mime.² The scene of the *Satiricon* is laid in Southern Italy. It is a probable inference that some part of the action, at least, was placed at Tarentum, to which city the ship of Lichas, himself a Tarentine (100. 7), was conveying the principal characters at the time of the shipwreck (cf. 101. 1). Other references to Tarentum, 38. 2, 61. 6, 48. 2, seem to indicate a predilection for that city on the part of Petronius, or at least a special familiarity with it. In view of this, we must allow a considerable importance to the fact that the type of mime that flourished most in this locale is known to have been distinctly phallic in character.³ It

¹ Athen. 621 C: (μαγφδός) πάντα ποιεῖ τὰ ἔξω κόσμον ὑποκρινόμενος ποτὲ μὲν γυναικαὶ καὶ μοιχοῦς καὶ μαστροπούς ποτὲ δ' ἄνδρα μεθύοντα.

² Rosenblüth, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

³ The use of the phallus was carried into comedy probably from the Bacchic celebrations; cf. Führ, *De Mimis Graecorum*, p. 24. Phallic comedy, so popular in

is extremely unlikely that Petronius, in a work so evidently designed to win popular favor, went very far beyond the standards to which his intended public was accustomed; if he was writing for a public that had been educated down to such frank buffoonery by long familiarity with a coarsened stage, the phallic element in Petronius may be easily explained. For comparison with mime, it is worth noting that the interest, in most of these scenes, is not sensual, but comic, and the comic effects, as in other episodes, are very largely those of surprise, misadventure, and personal humiliation.

The fact that one set of characters is carried through the loose adventures of the *Satiricon*, the continued attachment between Encolpius and Giton, and the part that jealousy plays in this attachment, have been made grounds for the hypothesis that the work of Petronius was modeled upon a lost genre of Greek satirical romances, which were a parody of the serious romances of love. This theory, proposed and defended with considerable ingenuity by Heinze, is subscribed to by Thomas.¹ Aside from the inherent improbability that all trace of such Greek originals should have been lost, the *Satiricon* fails to reveal any consistent scheme of parody on the serious Greek romances as we know them. The mere fact that "l'amour Grec" is the central theme in the *Satiricon* would hardly have impressed the reading public of Petronius' time as a delicious parody of the Greek romance, for the same theme inspired countless poems in Greek and Roman literature where no one would suspect parody, and, for all we know, may also have been the subject of serious romances. I fail to see a refinement of parody in the fact that, in contrast to the persistently faithful lovers of Longus, Achilles Tatius, and their school, we have a pair who are persistently and consistently unfaithful. The spasmodic jealousy of Encolpius is

the Dorian states, came to Tarentum and Southern Italy by way of Sparta, as it did to Syracuse by way of Corinth (cf. Nairn, *Mimes of Herondas*, Introduction, p. xxiii). Vase paintings from Southern Italy show the phallus as part of the costume of actors in the mimes that were popular there (cf. O. Jahn, *Beschreibung der Vasensammlung König Ludwigs in d. Pinak. in München 1854*, 8 S. CCXXVII f.), and the same symbol appears to have figured in Roman mime (cf. Grysar, "Der Römische Mimus," *Sitzungsberichte der Wiener Akademie der Wissenschaften philosophisch-historische Klasse*, 1854, XXII, 270, who cites Schol. ad Juvenal vi. 68; *penem ut habent in mimo*). In general cf. also Reich, *op. cit.*, I, 17.

¹ M. R. Heinze, "Petr. und der griechische Roman," *Hermes*, XXXIV (1899), 494-519; Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 207 f.

humorous only where it results, as it frequently does, in his personal discomfiture; in this he corresponds to what we know of the *zelotypus* as a recognized type in mime and comedy; cf. Juv. 8. 197, *Zelotypus Thymeles, stupidi collega Corinthi*. As for the wrath of Priapus, this is undoubtedly parody, but it is parody of a sort that was familiar to the mime and intimately connected with the phallic element therein.¹ In general, it is clear that the sex interest in the main narrative of Petronius is incidental to a sort of rough phallic comedy. A close analysis of episodes is unnecessary, but their tone may be amply explained by assuming that in writing them the author was conforming to the conventions of an impure type of farce.²

For the literary relationship between Petronius and the mime, such points of technique, though less tangible than some other considerations, are perhaps safer and more certain in the end. Insistence upon "the laugh," swift and sudden action, with a pronounced fondness for the *mêlée*, surprises of all kinds, horseplay, violence, and drastic buffoonery, were certainly common to mime and to Petronius. Resemblances in style and subject-matter between the rather meager remains of the dramatic mime and the *Satiricon* lose something of their significance when we note that most of these elements are found also in the new comedy. For example, the use of proverbs and the moralizing tendency³ are common throughout comedy. Epic parody, like the Ulysses references in the *Satiricon* of which Klebs has made so much, is found, among other places, in Plaut. *Bacch.* 925 f., where the siege of Troy is played upon in an elaborate comparison. The gods are burlesqued occasionally in comedy, as well as in mime and in Petronius, particularly in the *Amphitruo* of Plautus, which has itself been compared to the *Fabulae Rhinthonicae*. Ruses and strategies, important, as we know, in

¹ Cf. Collignon, *op. cit.*, p. 281, quoting Augustine *Civ. dei* vi. 75; Rosenblüth, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

² Rosenblüth, *op. cit.*, p. 52, n. 1, notes that in mime and in Petronius the same frankness is used in regard to all bodily functions; he compares Petr. 47. 2, 117. 12, with Pomp. 4 Rib.⁸, and the *Πορδή* of the *Oxyrhynchos* mime. In his second example from Petronius, 117. 12, the scurrility of Corax and Gíton is provoked by the fact that they are acting as porters, and are laden beyond their strength. Note the similar situation of Xanthias in Aristophanes *Ranae* i. 1, where Dionysus deprecates the same form of jest (line 8), and cf. von Leeuwen *ad locum* for the prevalence in comedy of this form of humor.

³ Rosenblüth, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

mime and in Petronius, are too common in comedy to need specific mention, and disguises, like that of Giton and Encolpius on the ship of Lichas, are employed by Plautus, not only in the *Casina*, which Rosenblüth mentions, but also in the *Miles* iv. 6 and 7, where Pleusicles masquerades as a sailor, in *Trinummus* iv. 2, *Pseudolus* iv 1. 2, *Persa* iv. 4, and elsewhere. The episode in Petronius in which Giton is hid beneath the bed, and, later, betrayed by a sneeze, is compared by Rosenblüth¹ to those scenes in mime where the adulterer, upon the approach of the lawful husband, concealed himself in some improvised shelter, for instance a chest (*cista*); cf. Juv. vi. 42 and scholion: qui totiens superveniente marito sub cista celatus est ut in mimo. That the comic use of such hiding-places was a familiar τόπος in Attic comedy may be inferred from Xenarchus 4K: 9-11 μη κλίμακα στησάμενον εἰσβῆναι λάθρα | μηδὲ δι' ὁπῆς κάτωθεν εἰσδύναι στέγης | μηδ' ἐν ἀχύροισιν εἰσενεχθῆναι τέχνη.

Forecasting the action by means of dreams, as in Petronius 17. 20, and 104. 2-3, is characteristic not only of mime but of comedy; cf. Plaut. *Merc.* ii. 1, and *Rudens* iii. 1. The combat, Petr. 95. 6, in which spits, meat-forks, and other improvised weapons are employed, is paralleled in Terence *Eun.* 771 ff., though, with the reserve that is characteristic of comedy, in the *Eunuchus* the soldier and his followers stop short of blows. Threats of violence are common in comedy, actual blows are rare. The *Amphitruo*, distinctive also in some other respects, is a notable exception to this rule; cf. i. 1. In mentioning (*op. cit.*, p. 151) the peculiar relations existing between master and slaves, as, for example, in Petr. 126. 5, 64. 11-12, 45. 7, 69. 3, 75. 11, Rosenblüth might well have noted that this theme, which, as he shows, was common in mime, appears also very frequently in comedy; cf. *Casina* 460: illuc est, illuc, quod hic hunc fecit vilicum, etc.; *Persa* 191. 2; *Asin.* 799 f. (cf. Petr. 64. 11-12).

In comic characters, what is left to us of the *Satiricon* does not offer a large number of the familiar types, but we find quite as much evident contact with comedy in this respect as exists with mime. The physician,² as he is alluded to in Petr. 42. 5, 47. 2, 56. 2, may be compared with the comic medicus in *Menaechmi*, act v. Schoolmasters are only just barely mentioned in the *Satiricon*, but if

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 50 and p. 78, n. 3.

² Rosenblüth, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

it is worth while considering the type,¹ Lydus, the paedagogus in the *Bacchides*, is a fine representative. Another type that is worth something more than a casual glance is the cook; the versatile and aggressive cook of Trimalchio (cf. Petr. 49, 74. 5, 70. 12) has a strong family resemblance to the braggart cook in comedy as represented in Plaut. *Pseud.* iii. 2, in the *Aulularia*, and in numberless other plays of the new comedy, as we can infer from the comic fragments. The captator theme, as developed in Petr. 116 ff., is not, to be sure, very extensively handled in existing remains of comedy, but Periplectomenus, *Miles* 705-15, describes the advantages that accrue to a wealthy bachelor from legacy-hunting friends and relatives in a way that reminds the reader of the joyous experiences of Eumolpus and his suite during their sojourn at Crotona.

Perhaps the most perfectly conventional comic type in the *Satiricon* is Chrysis, the go-between or intermediary in the Circe-Polyaenos episode, Petr. 126 ff. Chrysis, like Milphidippe in the *Miles*, is the bearer of proposals from her mistress, in this case a noble lady of Crotona, to a gallant who has been seen and admired from afar. The slave employed on such a mission is variously styled in comedy conciliatrix: *Miles* 1400, itaque ancilla conciliatrix quae erat internuntia; *Miles* 986, haec celox illius quae egreditur internuntia; or interpres, *Miles* 952. Like Pyrgopolinices in the *Miles*, Encolpius fatuously affects to believe that the ancilla is herself enamored of him; cf. Petr. 126. 8; itaque oratione blandissima plenus "rogo" inquam "numquid illa quae me amat, tu es?" Cf. *Miles* 1038, Py.: "di tibi dent quaecumque optes." Mil.: "tecum aetatem exigere ut liceat." Py. "nimium optas." Mil.: "non me dico, sed eram meam quae te demoritur." The fact that this identical twist is given the conversation in Petronius and in the *Miles* tempts one to translate the phrase that follows, frigidum schema, not, "a clumsy turn of speech," but a "stale gambit." At any rate, a cordial understanding is established between Encolpius and Chrysis, and a bantering conversation follows in 8-11; and cf. 12: precedentibus deinde longius iocis. Such intimate chaff between amator and ancilla is characteristic of comedy; cf. the long jesting conversation between Astaphium and Diniarchus, *Truc.* 115 ff.

¹ Rosenblüth, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

It would be possible to strengthen an argument for the debt of Petronius to comedy by a number of details which hardly belong under the title of this study. For example, the use of erotic epistles (cf. Petr. 129, 130) is a device that may well have been common in comedy (cf. Plaut. *Pseud.* 64 f.), but this might easily be over-emphasized. Much more significant is the passage 81. 3, where Encolpius reviews the past action of the story in a mournful soliloquy. In tone and purpose this tirade belongs clearly with the so-called morologia of comic lovers.¹ Both these points would lead naturally to a consideration of the sermo amatorius in Petronius, which, particularly in the Circe and Polyaeus episode, and in the Milesian tales, shows many reminiscences of comic diction; this, however, would require an extended study in itself. Such reference as I have made to comedy has been designed to show that, on the side of typical characters and comic material, Petronius may be somewhat more indebted to the new comedy than has been acknowledged by Collignon and Rosenblüth. His attitude toward this material, and his technique in the handling of comic episodes, seem to me to support their conclusions in regard to the very considerable influence of mime on Petronius.

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

¹ Cf. *Merc.* i. 4-5: vi amoris facere. qui aut dii aut soli aut lunae miserias narrant suas; *Persa* 49: amoris vitio, non meo nunc tibi morologus fio. Cf. also Leo *Plaut. Forsch.*,² p. 151, n. 1.